

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L OTTAWA 02174

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, CA
SUBJECT: MARCH LIBERAL POLICY CONFERENCE

1. LIBERAL PARTY POLICY CONFERENCE, HELD MARCH 24-27 IN TORONTO, WAS NOTEWORTHY MORE FOR ATMOSPHERICS THAN FOR PRECISE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.

2. DELEGATES QUICKLY DISMISSED CERTAIN FANCIFUL RECOMMENDATIONS, E.G. THAT CANADIAN UNITY BE REINFORCED BY HOLDING SOME PARLIAMENTARY SESSIONS ON A TRAIN MOVING ACROSS CANADA (DUBBED THE "TURBO PARLIAMENT"). THEY DID NOT, HOWEVER, HAMMER OUT MORE REASONED PROPOSALS LIKELY TO BE TRANSLATED INTO MAJOR LEGISLATION. AS NEARLY ALL OBSERVERS POINTED OUT, THIS GATHERING SUFFERED BADLY IN COMPARISON WITH LIBERALS 1970 KINGSTON CONFERENCE WHICH GAVE RISE TO A NUMBER OF DYNAMIC NEW PERSONALITIES IN THE PARTY AND PROPOSALS FOR IMAGINATIVE NEW LEGISLATION (E.G. MEDICAL AND HOSPITAL CARE, THE CANADA PENSION PLAN). TORONTO CONFERENCE, ON OTHER HAND, "PRODUCED NOTHING IN WAY OF NEW PERSONALITIES AND IDEAS AND VERY LITTLE IN WAY OF FRESH THINKING ABOUT OLD IDEAS," IN OPINION OF COLUMNIST GOEFFREY STEVENS OF TORONTO GLOBE AND MAIL.
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3. RESULTS WERE QUITE DIFFERENT IN TERMS OF ATMOSPHERICS. WORKSHOP AFTER WORKSHOP DEMONSTRATED PREVAILING FEELING THAT GOVERNMENT HAD LOST TOUCH WITH THE PEOPLE. IN NEAR POPULIST TERMS, DELEGATES EXPRESSED THEIR HOSTILITY TO AN OVERLY STRONG CENTRAL GOVERNMENT IMPOSING NATIONAL POLICIES ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES. THEY WERE CLEARLY FED UP

WITH A BLOATED FEDERAL BUREAUCRACY PLANNING, PLANNING, PLANNING IN AN OTTAWA WORLD DIVORCED FROM REST OF CANADA. FEELING WAS NOT, HOWEVER, SIMPLY ANTI-GOVERNMENT. DELEGATES, FOR EXAMPLE, SUPPORTED PROPOSALS FOR A CENTRAL INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY TO BOOST CANADIAN EXPORTS AND A NATIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAM. RATHER, DELEGATES SEEMED TO BE DELIVERING MESSAGE TO FEDERAL GOVERNMENT THAT ITS OVER-CENTRALIZED ORIENTATION HAD TAKEN IT DANGEROUSLY OUT OF TOUCH WITH REGIONS AND PEOPLE OF CANADA.

4. DELEGATES MAY HAVE BEEN UNHAPPY WITH TRUDEAU GOVERNMENT, BUT THEY WERE ENTIRELY HAPPY WITH TRUDEAU THE LEADER. HE WAS WARMLY RECEIVED THROUGHOUT AND THERE WAS NO EVIDENCE OF ANTI-TRUDEAU SENTIMENT. PERHAPS MOST TELLING, A SUBDUED JOHN TURNER APPEARED AND, ALTHOUGH HE TEMPORARILY MADE A STIR, HE DID NOT BECOME FOCUS FOR ANY DISSIDENT ELEMENT.

5. COMMENT: MEMBER OF LIBERAL PARTY NATIONAL OFFICE STRESSED TO EMBASSY OFFICER THAT TORONTO CONFERENCE WAS NOT DESIGNED TO COME UP WITH HARD RESOLUTIONS AND THAT MEDIA STORIES HIGHLIGHTING NO SUBSTANTIVE RESULTS OVERLOOKED THIS FACT. EVEN GRANTING THIS, HOWEVER, GENERAL LACK OF IMAGINATIVE PROPOSALS (AND THERE WERE MANY PROPOSALS) AND FAILURE OF NEW AND EXCITING PERSONALITIES TO EMERGE IS, TO US, SIGN OF A TIRING PARTY WHICH IS RUNNING SOMEWHAT THIN ON IMAGINATION. IN ANY CASE, MOST SIGNIFICANT RESULT WAS ACROSS-THE-BOARD SUPPORT FOR TRUDEAU. NO DOUBT BUOYED BY RECENT TURNAROUND IN POLLS, THESE PARTY

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STALWARTS INTEND TO STICK WITH WHAT THEY SEE AS A WINNER.
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